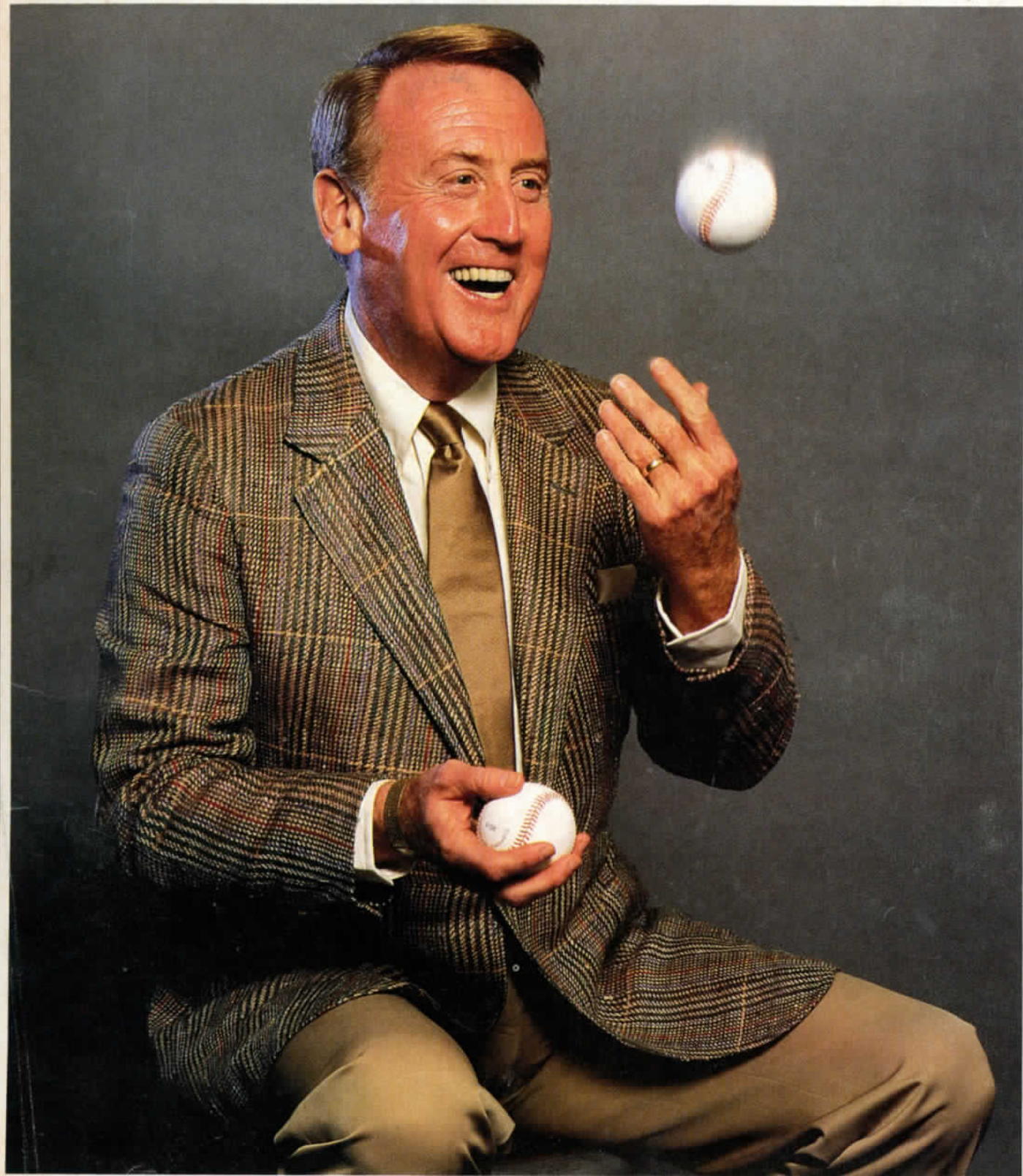


TO: NATALIE FROM: PAKKY

OCTOBER 13, 1985

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PEOPLE • PLACES • PLEASURES




Vin Extraordinaire: Scully's World Series Primer



Anacapa Island in the spring (above)—when the coreopsis, wild hyacinth and sea fig are in bloom (right)—resembles some fantasy by Disney. On the beach of San Miguel (far right), a bull elephant seal and cow bellow in unison at an infrequent intruder.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY FRANS LANTING





CALL OF THE ISLES

A Leisurely Expedition
Through the Channel Islands,
Home to Sea Fig, Elephant Seals
and Unearthly Vistas

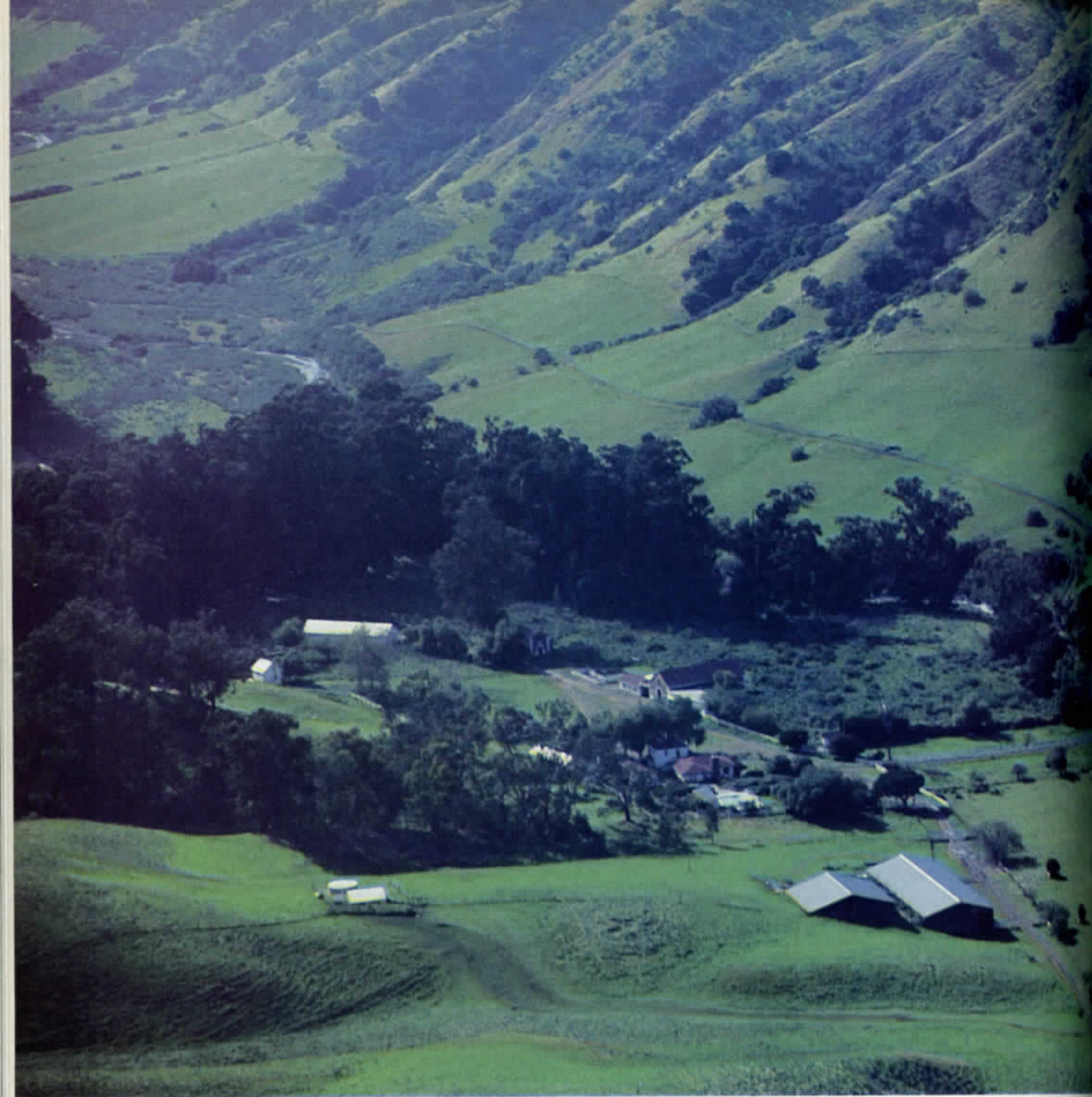
BY PAGE STEGNER

For nearly an hour I've been watching our approach to the northern Channel Islands on the radar scope, a cup of coffee gimbaled in one hand, a brass rail clenched in the other. The Ellen B. Scripps, a 90-foot, steel-hulled research vessel from the Scripps Institution of Oceanography in San Diego, plows through the winter swell, smashing her blunt nose into the wind-driven sea like a pugnacious whale. Heavy spray lashes the bridge, runs aft across the fantail and out through the open transom. In the predawn darkness, safety seems to depend largely on the green sweep of that radar beam with its ghostly reconstruction of coast, offshore drilling rigs, shipping traffic and the treacherous islands that dominate the Santa Barbara Channel. Even when daybreak slowly begins to penetrate the storm cover, the demarcation between ocean and sky is indecipherable.

We are on our way up from San Clemente and San Nicolas, headed for San Miguel, the westernmost island in this chain of submerged mountaintops off the Southern California mainland. Pleistocene topography, the geologists tell us. I read learned papers on the influence of eustatic oscillation of the sea level on submarine terracing, differential uplift of crustal blocks, tectonic deformation, basin deposition, but the information is too solemn and makes no pictures. What one sees from deck level, and at a distance, is low, faintly blue with haze, and often hard to distinguish from a bank of fog. Up close there is greater topographic differentiation—narrow beach / *Continued*

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Photographs by Frans Lanting and text by Page Stegner.





Continued / or rocky shelf leading to tawny cliffs, sand falling from the windswept mesa above, a handful of battered trees emerging from the thin fog like a photographic image in the darkroom tray. Cormorants pose on the jagged dorsal fin of a submerged reef. Sea lions poke curious heads above the rhythmic swells beyond the break.

The primary purpose of this expedition has been to continue a study of the subtidal habitat around San Nicolas Island, assessing its suitability as a translocation site for sea otters. That work has been completed with ship time to spare, and University of California biologist Burney LeBoeuf wants to look in on the elephant seal colony at Point Bennett,

where he conducted extensive research back in 1968. The crew doesn't object to this little cruise. The fishing is fabulous off San Miguel.

In the galley we ignore the Ellen B.'s simulation of a rodeo bronc and wolf down bacon and eggs and flapjacks and the remnants of last night's cherry cheesecake. Sea legs intact. Nobody hanging his

head in the scuppers. By the third cup of coffee the steady drone of the engines subsides, and our floating diner stops pitching and begins to roll in a cross swell. The first mate pauses on his way up to the bridge and remarks that we are in the passage between Santa Rosa and San Miguel, slowing because of the changing topographic configuration of



the sea floor (we don't want to run aground) and the poor visibility (we don't want to run onto the beach). The weather, he says, seems to be lifting.

Up on deck we have a clear view off the starboard bow at the northeastern flank of San Miguel and Cuyler Harbor, a putative sanctuary protected on the west by Harris Point and on the south by

the island itself, but otherwise completely exposed. We have a trailing sea almost directly out of the north, and if we are to have any chance of landing at all we will have to round Cardwell Point and head for Tyler Bight on the southwestern shore. The swells should be blocked by Point Bennett, making a run through the surf in the / *Continued*



Santa Cruz's Central Valley (left). On Anacapa, a western gull peers from some sea figs (top right), while juvenile brown pelicans preen (bottom). Silvery elephant seal pups cavort on San Miguel (center).
PHOTOGRAPHS BY FRANS LANTING



Continued / Zodiac, our inflated rubber boat, less hazardous—though “less hazardous” is a relative term around San Miguel. Breakers converge on the submerged rocks from the north and the south—big rolling combers approaching head-on at about 10 knots, meeting in a geyser of whitewater that bursts 30 feet in the air and issues a booming report we can hear from almost a mile away. Because of the winds and the conflicting directions of the cold-water California current and a warm-water counter-current, the area around San Miguel is said to be the roughest on the Pacific coast.

The electronic equipment available to the captain of the *Ellen B.* as he runs toward Tyler Bight is a far cry from the taffrail log and compass provided the first European to discover the Southern California coast in 1542, Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo, a Portuguese explorer. Cabrillo's luck ran out somewhere out there off our starboard beam—his nem-

esis not a mishap at sea, as befits an explorer in the land of gold and grifins, but gangrene. He fell on San Miguel and broke his arm; two months later he died.

The real discoverers of the northern Channel Islands, it should be noted, antedate Sr. Cabrillo by more than a few years. How many more years, and precisely who the first prehistoric people to live in the region were, are still matters of some speculation and controversy. The clear evidence, from radiocarbon dating of cemeteries on Santa Cruz, Santa Rosa and San Miguel islands, indicates human occupation as far back as 7,500 years, and more or less continual inhabitation from that time until the early 19th Century, when the Chumash-speaking Canalino Indians finally succumbed to imported diseases, the Hispanic penchant for relocating heathens and working them to death, and the toll extracted by Aleut seal hunters.

The not- / *Continued*



Once nearly extinct, seals and sea lions now loll by the thousands on the beach of San Miguel, at top. Above, lush Anacapa, one of the most beautiful of the Channel Islands.

THE ISLES

Continued / so-clear evidence of prehistoric habitation in this area, however, is a good deal more interesting. American anthropology places the earliest appearance of man on this continent at anywhere from 13,000 to 15,000 years ago. In 1975, John Woolley, a geologist working for the Vail & Vickers Corp. on Santa Rosa, discovered a large fire pit three meters in diameter under a thick overburden exposed by erosion. Charcoal collected for dating when the site was excavated in 1976 showed no measurable radiocarbon activity—in other words, it was older than the upper limit of radiocarbon dating, older than 40,000 years.

The Woolley discovery seems to corroborate what anthropological and archeological researchers such as Philip Orr (from the Santa Barbara Museum) and Rainer Berger (from UCLA) have been arguing for some years—that the evidence of early man in North America, specifically the "barbecue pits" of Santa Rosa, predates official estimates by at least 15,000 to 25,000 years.

Tyler Bight is a small chomp out of the southwestern side of San Miguel, protected on the north and to some extent on the west. The storm that has been battering us all the way down the coast has taken a miraculous break, pulled back to sea and left the entire Santa Barbara Channel in surprised sunshine, and while the long-range weather forecast isn't encouraging, we can sneak in on low tide, spend a few hours at Point Bennett and still get back to the ship before it starts to blow. Twenty thousand marine mammals lying snout to schnoz on a stretch of beach only a few hundred yards wide and a half-mile long seems to me a sight worth taking a few risks to see.

All of the Channel Islands host colonies of pinnipeds—seals, walrus and the like—but San Miguel claims the most diverse population anywhere in the world: six species, including the only breeding colony of northern fur seals south of the Pribilofs and the increasing presence (though non-breeding) of the rare and endangered Guadalupe fur seal. Commercial hunting of these animals (as well as harbor seals, Steller's sea lions, California sea lions, northern elephant seals and sea

otters) began at the end of the 18th Century and in 100 years succeeded in virtually wiping out pinnipeds from the southern part of the eastern Pacific. The International Fur Seal Treaty, signed by the United States, England, Russia and Japan in 1911, was almost too late. Fewer than 50 northern elephant seals remained, a handful of otters and not enough Guadalupe and northern fur seals to even count.

Thanks largely to the 1911 treaty, and the 1972 Marine Mammal Protection Act, the current news is not as bleak. Southern sea otters have returned to an estimated population of 1,500 to 1,800 (as opposed to 120,000 northern sea otters); Guadalupe fur seals, thought extinct until 1928, now number almost 2,000; and the northern elephant seal has come back like the fruit-fly. LeBoeuf recalls that when he began work on San Miguel in 1968, there were approximately 11,000 animals in the breeding colony; today that number has nearly doubled.

On the beach at Tyler Bight we change from wet suits to pants and boots. Behind us the slope rises an abrupt 400 feet, rocky and sandy, held precariously together by a variety of low-growing plants and prick-

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ly pear cactus. At the top it flattens into a broad mesa eight miles long and four miles wide. This barren plateau distinguishes San Miguel from the more heavily vegetated mountain-valley configuration of Santa Rosa and Santa Cruz, and from the lush, narrow pitch of Middle and West Anacapa. Indeed, Anacapa in the spring—when the coreopsis, paintbrush, goldenfield and sea fig are all in bloom—resembles some fantasy by Disney. Santa Barbara, Santa Cruz and Santa Rosa all turn out in similar display when the weather warms, but San Miguel shows the effects of harder times. Its most startling display of flora is a caliche forest in the center of the island—calcium carbonate root castings, some of them formed more than 14,000 years ago when sand dunes buried existing vegetation and the organic acids in the plants reacted chemically to cement the particles together. While Santa Cruz and Santa Rosa support stands of pine and oak (including one of only two stands of Torrey pines in the world), San Miguel can offer only a ghost forest of concrete snags.

The National Park Service suggests in its general management plan for the region that San Miguel

is recovering from previous overgrazing by sheep (prehistoric elephants were the first offenders), but they would have a hard time proving it from the barren look of things at this end of the island. All of the northern Channel Islands have suffered from a variety of introduced creatures—goats, pigs, rabbits, cats, rats, cattle—but sheep are particularly destructive. In sufficient numbers, they will destroy everything when drought renders forage thin, and they have wreaked havoc on the native plants and grasses throughout the eastern Pacific.

From the mesa above Tyler Bight it is only a mile across the sand and rocks to the bluffs above Point Bennett. The wind rustles the sparse scrub and cools the perspiration as we pause to catch our breath. The only accurate description is "barren." Buff-colored rocks, dunes, deep arroyos cut here and there by erosion, crumbling ledges of sedimentary deposits exposed by wind and rain. An island fox, not much bigger than a house cat, watches us for a few minutes from a low hill, then slips quietly into a ravine. An endemic subspecies related to the mainland gray fox, it is found on all of the Channel Islands except Ana-

capa and Santa Barbara, and here on San Miguel in numbers that range in estimate from 151 to 498.

Like much of the California desert that this tableland resembles, appreciation takes a patient eye and a liking for landscapes that, on the face of it, say nothing—or rather say only space, silence. There is, of course, "white noise," nondirectional sounds of surf and wind in the brush, but it is sound that merely sets off the astonishing primordial stillness from the emptiness that surrounds.

At Point Bennett the beach is littered with what looks like fat, black rocks—15,000 of them, moving occasionally and flipping sand in their neighbors' faces, the heads of harem periodically rearing their scarred, parasite-encrusted, 6,000-pound bulks to warn off some rubber-lipped deviate who has been skulking around the fringe of the sultan's sandbox. One of the unfortunate consequences of being born a male elephant seal is that unless you are in the top 5% of your class, you are destined to a life of celibacy.

Breeding season lasts from the time the females head ashore in mid-December to drop their pups until they leave in / *Continued*

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THE ISLES

Continued / mid-March to feed for six weeks and regain the enormous weight lost in the period after they give birth. Small wonder. The newly born weigh 85 pounds, but in the three months it takes them to transform from pups to weaners they gain more than 200 pounds, all on mom's milk. And during this time mom eats nothing.

There are a considerable number of sea lions mixed in with the lethargic elephant seals. More wary of man, they scuttle like a retreating army into the sea at our approach and then bark at us in righteous indignation from beyond the breakers until we move down the beach. A number of sanderlings skitter along the tide line, poking their sharp beaks into the damp sand in search of amphipods. The islands host a number of sea-bird breeding populations—stormy petrels, cormorants, auklets, western gulls, guillemots, murrelets, brown pelicans—and if I were a dedicated bird watcher, I could add these sanderlings to the snowy plover, black-bellied plover, oyster catcher and California gulls I have seen today. Not to mention the tangled sticks of a long-abandoned eagle eyrie above Tyler Bight that has somehow managed to survive many seasons of winter storms. Humans drove out the last nesting eagles from the Channel Islands years ago, shooting them for alleged interference with sheep production, or simply for sport from passing boats.

Humans also nearly wiped out the brown pelican by overuse of agricultural pesticides as far north as the Salinas Valley. DDT concentrations in the fish on which pelicans feed affected the hardness of their eggshells, and in 1970 it was suddenly discovered that reproduction was down to zero. The ban on DDT has resulted in a resurgence of the West Anacapa rookery, the northernmost breeding colony in the eastern Pacific and the only one in U.S. territorial waters.

Dark banks of storm clouds have moved closer to the mainland. I collect a handful of fossil land-snail shells, each about the size of a pea, from one of the many windrows between the dunes while LeBoeuf calls the Ellen B. on the walkie-talkie to tell the crew we'll be back at Tyler Bight in an hour. They have been standing offshore just outside Adams Cove fishing for rock cod (commonly mislabeled red snapper in most California restaurants) and



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are not overly pleased to be interrupted. One 55-gallon garbage can full of vermillion, garibaldi, yellow-tail and calico bass isn't enough.

Climbing up the slope from Point Bennett, we stop to rummage through an ancient kitchen midden full of broken shells of intertidal organisms (abalone featured prominently), a few caliche-encrusted bones, some simple scraping tools of chipped stone. A sign nearby advises visitors to confine their observations of marine mammals to the bluffs above the point, and indeed the Park Service requires all but research scientists to be accompanied on San Miguel by a ranger. Back on top of the mesa and looking toward the mainland, the whole eastward sweep of the island dissolves in an aura of sea mist thrown up by surf pounding the coast. From the cliffs above Tyler Bight the Ellen B. looks like a toy boat, the Zodiac hauled up on the beach like a frail craft with which to assault the rising swells. We are about to get wet.

Between San Pedro Point, at the eastern tip of Santa Cruz, and the Ventura mainland we turn south and head toward San Diego. It might be possible to run into the lee of Santa Cruz and see whether the storm will blow itself out during the night, but the marine weather report is so uncompromisingly foul that there seems little purpose served by pitching and rolling for 12 hours just to confirm what is already known. High winds and high seas will make landing anywhere a virtual impossibility and navigation in the small boat extremely dangerous. Not so secure in the big boat either, as the half-submerged wreck of a freighter off the southern shore of Santa Rosa seems to testify.

Anacapa approaches on our starboard bow. The light is burning on its eastern promontory just above Arch Rock, an offshore volcanic slab worn through the center by millions of pounding waves, and we pass close enough so that I can see movement around the old Coast Guard station, now used as a ranger's residence and visitor center by the Park Service. Although facilities on Anacapa are minimal, its proximity to the mainland makes it the most visited of the islands, and its ecosystems the most vulnerable to human intrusion. The Park Service is concerned about the impact of sightseers in the intertidal zone and is studying ways to alleviate the stress that visitation / *Continued*

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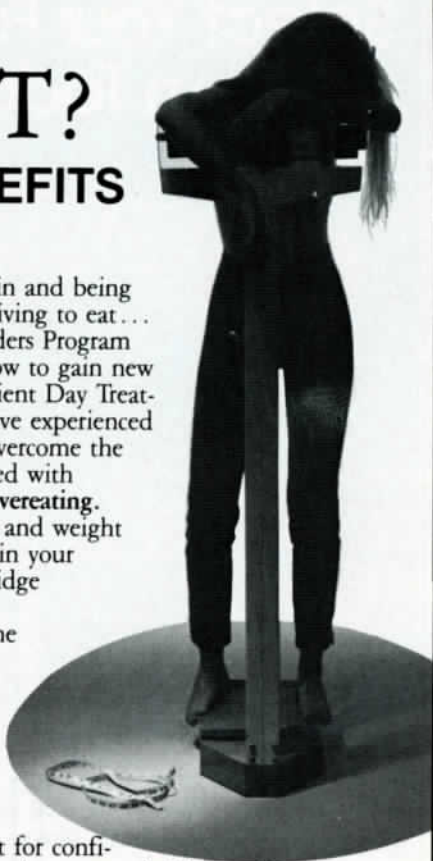
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THE ISLES

Continued / inevitably creates in a fragile habitat. West Anacapa, the domain of the endangered brown pelican, is closed to the public except for the tide-pool regions. Middle and East Anacapa have small systems of trails that overlook a number of coves and marine mammal haul-out areas, and that can be similarly closed during critical parts of the year. Ultimately, the acquisition of the east end of Santa Cruz and all of Santa Rosa by the Department of Interior and the development of visitor sites on those large islands should take some of the pressure off Anacapa.

The energy and the authority behind much of the recent concern for preservation of biologic, anthropologic and geologic resources on the islands belong to William Ehorn, superintendent of the 250,000-acre national park. When discussions of changing the islands' status from monument to park first began, a number of people were concerned that inclusion in the national park system would have little effect in protecting the environments; that, indeed, in any area set aside "for the enjoyment of the public," the possibility of protecting fragile biotic communities becomes extremely remote, and as a result their value as a place for scientific study is severely limited. But Ehorn has thus far been able to extend the concept of national park well beyond its too often unfortunate manifestation as national resort, and he seems to regard his job, at least in part, as that of custodian of a national scientific and educational preserve. Many of us would be quite content to know we own a piece of a place where elephant seals and brown pelicans are doing quite nicely, thank you. A kind of national wildlife monastery. No visitors.

In many respects the islands are a success story in a long, dismal history of environmental abuse, albeit a success story still *in medias res*. What man was once bent on exploiting to the hilt, and nearly destroyed in the process, he is now trying to restore—removing, insofar as he is able, the destructive elements he introduced, protecting by law that which he once saw only as fur coats, restricting his movements through a wilderness where he acknowledges himself a guest.

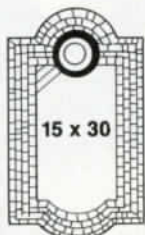
Quiet in the monastery. Pinnipeds at prayer. □



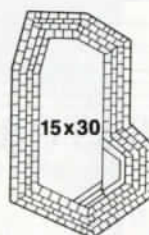
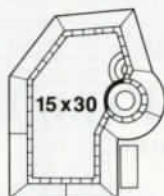
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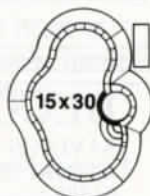
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